

## Lawn Service Contracts

### *fast facts*

- Ask for recommendations from neighbors who have used lawn care services.
- Talk with representatives from several lawn care firms and get estimates.
- Check to see if the company you are interested in is licensed by your state.
- Find out if the company has liability insurance.
- Read your contract carefully.
- See if there are extra charges for special services.
- Find out if the work is guaranteed.

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Growing a green lawn takes time and energy. These days, some people prefer hiring lawn care services to take over a large part of the effort.

Lawn care services perform some of the time-consuming and complicated tasks of lawn maintenance. These may include analyzing, fertilizing, and seeding the soil; controlling and killing weeds and pests; and caring for trees and shrubs. These services may be provided an average of four to five times during the spring through fall. You also may want these firms to regularly mow and water your lawn.

Sometimes, in order to hire these companies, you must sign expensive and long-term contracts. It is important, therefore, to know exactly what you want from a lawn care firm. The following information may help you decide whether to hire a lawn care service and, if so, how to find the one right for you.

### How Do You Choose a Lawn Care Service?

If you decide you want to hire a lawn care service, you may want to consider the following suggestions.

- Talk with others in your neighborhood who have used lawn care services. Find out which companies have done a good job and why.
- Talk with representatives from several lawn care firms and get estimates. The lowest estimate may not necessarily provide all the services you need.
- Remember that each lawn is different and that your lawn does not necessarily need the same treatment as your neighbor's. Some companies may offer a free lawn analysis. Make sure you are getting "custom" service.
- Even the best lawns have weeds and pests. Ask to see evidence of specific and real problems before you agree to any treatment.

- Check to see if the company is licensed by your state. Licensing often requires employees to have special training, especially those who apply pesticides to lawns. Ask what specific lawn care training the employees have.
- Check with your local consumer affairs office or Better Business Bureau to see if any complaints have been lodged against the company.
- Find out if the company has liability insurance to cover any accidents that might happen while work is being performed in your yard or while pesticides are being applied.
- Ask if the company belongs to a professional pest control association. This membership may help keep members better trained and informed.

### What Should You Look for in Your Contract?

If you select a lawn care service, you should put all your agreements with the company into a written contract. You may want to keep the following information in mind before you sign any contract.

- Read your contract carefully. Know what specific services and lawn problems are covered and what are not.
- See if there are extra charges for special services, such as fertilizing, disease control, or reseeded.
- Find out if the work is guaranteed. If it is, get the guarantee (or warranty) in writing. Know what the guarantee includes and excludes, and how long it lasts. For example, if you believe a seeding job produced little improvement, will the company come back and reseed for free during the same growing season?

- Know how long the services will be performed. Must you renew annually or is service scheduled indefinitely? What are the costs of renewal and how much might they increase? Many lawn care service contracts require written notice to cancel. Find out how you can cancel the contract you are considering.

## **If Pesticide Treatment is Offered, What Should You Look For?**

Lawn care companies often provide pest, disease, and weed control services. This usually means the company will use a pesticide on your lawn.

Pesticides are toxic chemicals used to destroy different kinds of lawn pests. For example, insecticides are used to kill bugs; herbicides kill weeds.

Lawn care companies generally maintain that the kind and strength of the pesticides they use are safe. Some organizations, however, including the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), have some health and safety concerns. Before you agree to pesticide treatment for your lawn, you may want to consider the following information.

- Although pesticides can kill unwanted weeds and bugs, the treatment also may destroy the organisms that create a healthy soil for your lawn. Some people feel that a lawn that is overtreated will become dependent on chemicals to thrive.
- If pesticides are going to be used on your lawn, find out what specific lawn problems are being addressed.
- Get the name of the pesticide in writing. Ask to see the EPA label and read it carefully before any pesticide is applied to your lawn.

- Find out about the harmful characteristics of the pesticide, especially to those most vulnerable to its effects: young children, pregnant women, older people, and household pets.
- Inquire about the availability of less harmful compounds.
- Inquire carefully about the training of anyone who applies the pesticide to your lawn.
- Ask what kind of posting will be done to notify people in your neighborhood that pesticides are being applied to your lawn. A number of jurisdictions now require this notice. If your city or county does not require the notice, you still may want to let neighbors know — to protect them from any problems that might arise from the pesticide application.
- Find out what you need to do during the pesticide treatment — and for how long. Should you stay indoors, keep your windows closed, bring in your outdoor lawn furniture and children's toys? How long should you stay off treated areas?
- Make sure pesticides are not applied in windy weather (over 10 miles an hour). This will prevent their spreading to other lawns.
- Ask for alternatives to pesticide applications. Many companies now offer a more “organic” and less chemical approach to lawn care.
- Ask about ecological effects, including danger to non-target species and the possibility of groundwater contamination.

## **What Are Alternatives to Pesticide Controls?**

Good-looking lawns may take a year or more of care to get that way. Although you may choose to use chemical applications to quickly improve the appearance of your lawn, you also may want to consider longer-term approaches to lawn care that do not include pesticides.

One such approach is called “integrated pest management.” Basically, this involves planting several kinds of disease resistant grasses, properly conditioning your soil, and using new low-toxicity pest control materials.

## **For More Information**

For more information about integrated pest management, you may want to contact your local county extension agency. For more information about specific lawn care companies in your area, contact your local consumer protection agency or Better Business Bureau.

If you need information beyond that given on a pesticide label, you can call the National Pesticide Telecommunications Network at 1-800-858-7378. If you have problems with the pesticide application of a lawn care company, contact your state or county environmental protection agency. To report contract or guarantee (warranty) problems with a lawn service company, write: Correspondence Branch, Federal Trade Commission, Washington, D.C. 20580. Although the FTC does not generally intervene in individual disputes, the information you provide may indicate a pattern of possible law violations requiring action by the Commission.

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